

# Dr Kahn's Museum: obscene anatomy in Victorian London

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Dr Joseph Kahn's Anatomical and Pathological Museum was the 19th century's best-known and most visited public museum of anatomy. Established in England in 1851, at the height of popular interest in anatomy, Kahn's museum was intended to show the 'wondrous' structure of the body and to warn of the harmful consequences to health of abuses that 'distort or defile' its 'beautiful structure'. Its subsequent decline into a front for the sale of quack remedies for venereal disease damaged the reputation of anatomy museums. After 22 years, and several bizarre legal cases, opposition from self-appointed representatives of the medical profession and anti-vice campaigners forced it to close. The successful prosecution of Kahn's museum under the Obscene Publications Act of 1857 branded all public display of anatomical specimens as potentially obscene. Thereafter, anatomical education was restricted to medical professionals and public anatomy survived only in side-shows. The public anatomical museum has remained, for increasingly outdated reasons, a lost opportunity.

## THE RISE OF PUBLIC ANATOMY

There had been well-known anatomy museums in England since the 18th century. The famous collection amassed by John Hunter (1728–1793) was purchased by the government in 1799 for £15 000 and presented to the Company (later the Royal College) of Surgeons in London. Although there were many hundreds of visitors, the collection was not open to the public and was viewed mainly by medical men or others who could obtain an introduction. On a smaller scale, metropolitan hospitals and some medical teachers maintained private anatomy collections for their students. For the London public, there were exhibitions of anatomical waxworks, open to anyone with the price of admission. Guillaume Desnoues's (1650–1735) detailed full-length anatomical models were brought to London in 1719 to educate and entertain the curious 'without exciting the feeling of horror men usually have on seeing corpses'.<sup>1</sup> Other shows were more sensational; Abraham Chovet (1704–1790), the son of a London wine merchant, advertised in 1733 a model of: 'a woman...suppos'd opened alive...' showing the circulation of blood between mother and child with coloured liquids.<sup>2</sup> Desnoues's and

Chovet's models ended up in Rackstrow's public museum in the Strand, which included an 'anatomical exhibition' with 'a collection of real anatomical preparations' and 'a great variety of skeletons'.<sup>3</sup> Popular interest in anatomy waned in the late-18th century and Rackstrow's closed in the late 1780s.

In the 1820s, two things happened that stimulated public interest in matters anatomical. One was, of course, the scandal of the murders committed by Burke and Hare in Edinburgh in 1827/1828, which provoked real or imagined concerns in London and elsewhere. The other was the increasing interest in wax or pasteboard anatomical models as a substitute for real bodies. In 1828 the word anatomical

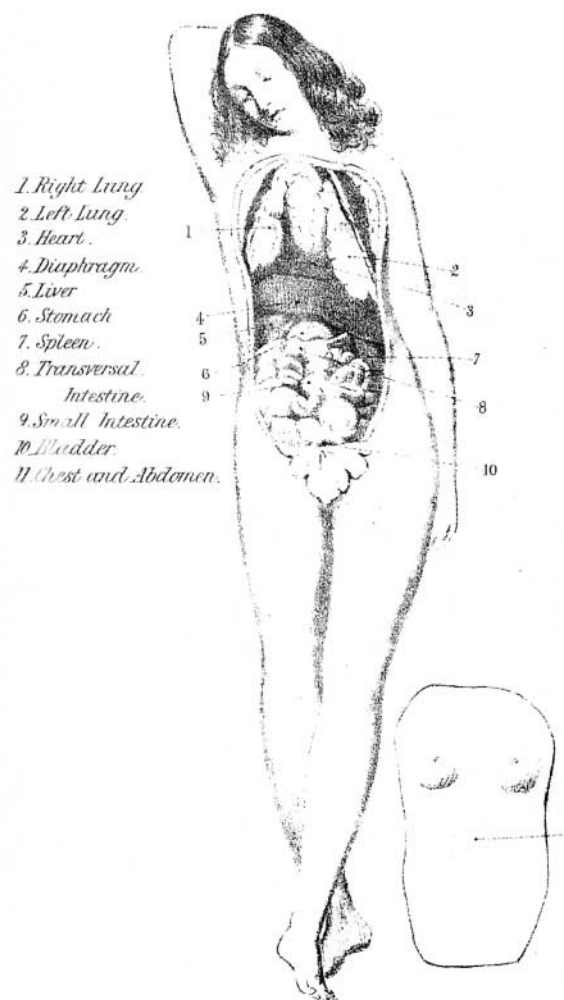


Figure 1 Dr Kahn in 1851 (Kahn J. Catalogue of Dr. Kahn's Anatomical Museum, now exhibiting at 315, Oxford Street, near Regent Circus. London: W J Golbourn, 1851)

'turned to gold' and wax modellers again began to stage public exhibitions of their work. Simmons's waxworks at 167 High Holborn exhibited an 'anatomical Samson', which could be taken apart to reveal the viscera, 'with a view to superseding the use of dead bodies'. Alongside it were waxworks of Burke and Hare. The Edinburgh scandal highlighted the shortage of subjects for dissection and models were presented as a way forward. Although models were never widely accepted as an alternative to dissection for medical student teaching, they made anatomy available to a wider audience: when Signor Sarti's exhibition, with an anatomical Venus and Adonis, opened at 27 Margaret Street in 1839, the *Athenaeum* recommended it to 'younger male readers' who wanted to obtain 'a few general ideas on the subject of anatomy, which they may do without labour or disgust'. The study of his models, claimed Sarti, would give the visitor 'the power to communicate intelligibly with his medical advisor' and 'teach him the absolute necessity of putting implicit faith in those men who have made Anatomy and Physiology the study of their lives.'<sup>4</sup>

### THE OXFORD STREET MUSEUM

In 1851, Joseph Kahn (Figure 1), a 32-year-old 'medical doctor' (as he described himself in the census) from Alsace, arrived in London with his pregnant wife and mother-in-law. Born on 16 January 1820 in Haguenau, Kahn was a former pupil of Professor Ignaz Döllinger (1770–1841) in Munich, and had worked with the embryologist Professor Michael Pius Erdl (1815–1848), before setting up his own museum of anatomy in Germany in 1848. After 3 years travelling around Germany and Holland, the Kahn family settled in London at 315 Oxford Street, where Joseph opened the 'Museum of Anatomy and Pathology'. This anatomical, surgical and embryological collection comprised specimens preserved in spirits, models in wax and leather, and microscopical preparations, all intended 'to present the scientific observer with a general and correct view of the perfect and wonderful structure of the body'.<sup>5</sup> A representative of the *Lancet* visited the new museum and was 'much gratified' with the exhibition, which included an anatomical Venus (Figure 2). Of the embryology section he wrote, '[w]e cannot speak too highly', while in a room 'set apart for members of the medical profession' syphilis and gonorrhoea were 'very well shown'.<sup>6</sup> Despite this and other favourable reviews, and visits from minor nobility and others of the 'haut ton', the museum failed to yield a profit, even after the price of admission was reduced from 2 shillings to 1 shilling and ladies were admitted, separately, to some of the rooms. Kahn therefore embarked on a tour of the North of England, visiting Newcastle upon Tyne, Manchester and Liverpool, and added a 'gallery of all nations', a display of waxworks of the different races of



*The anatomical figure separating into 85 pieces, exhibited in the Museum.*

Figure 2 Kahn's anatomical Venus

men. There were soon more than 500 exhibits, including some sensational additions such as the '[h]ead and face of a man who fell victim to the demoralising and destructive habit of onanism'. Such horrors were kept in the room for medical men; the general exhibition was recommended to 'families and schools'. When the museum returned to London, the *Lancet* noted that it had won 'golden opinions' on tour. Kahn published an atlas of embryology, based on the work of his former teacher Professor Erdl, in which he noted with satisfaction that the 'greatest interest' had been expressed in 'physiological science' and 'microscopic embryology', 'even' in the provinces.<sup>7</sup>

One problem that public displays of anatomy had to face in the 19th century was that representations of the sexual organs or of venereal diseases might shock those of a modest temperament. Anatomical Samsons and Venuses were therefore intentionally reminiscent of classical sculptures, a familiar and inoffensive representation of the human form.

In Kahn's museum, the morbid appearances of sexually transmitted diseases were presented in a separate room ostensibly for medical men, a group who hardly needed to be reminded of them, but in practice any man or woman who paid was admitted. When the *Lancet* expressed concern that 'females' were allowed into the museum, especially the medical room, Kahn reassured its readers that on days when ladies were admitted, any models that 'could offend the most prudish taste' were removed; and when the *Lancet* recommended that additional models be taken away, Kahn acquiesced. When challenged that 'females were permitted to inspect the syphilitic models', Kahn replied that these were 'nurses, midwives, and other persons professionally interested'. Unlike medical schools, public anatomical museums were not a male preserve: in 1854 an 'anatomical exhibition' intended for ladies, Madame Caplin's, opened in Marlborough Street, to illustrate 'the evil effects of tight lacing'.<sup>8</sup> The *Lancet* was satisfied with Kahn's explanations and continued to recommend his museum.<sup>9</sup>

### ADVERTISING QUACKS

Despite the success of the tour, and the favourable reviews, the museum still failed to make a profit after its return to London in 1853. Kahn's livelihood was further threatened by competition from the short-lived Reimers's Museum, which exhibited a similar range of wax models;<sup>10</sup> and by an attempt by a 'good looking' 14-year-old boy in his employ to extort money from him by alleging that Kahn had 'interfered' with him.<sup>11</sup> Kahn suspected that a third party, perhaps a competitor, had encouraged these apparently false accusations against him. The *Lancet* remained supportive, dismissing the allegations as a 'foul conspiracy'.<sup>12</sup> As Thomas Wakley's (1795–1862) *Lancet* was the leading anti-quackery journal of the time, its support for Kahn's museum is significant. Wakley saw public education as a challenge to quackery<sup>13</sup> and thus approved of the museum's purpose. It was Kahn's subsequent collaboration with advertising quacks, rather than his museum's content or audience, that would provoke Wakley's hostility.

A way out of financial difficulty arose when Kahn became aware of the activities of a group offering cures for venereal disease under the name of Perry and Co, though the name of the family was Jordan. Unlike regular medical practitioners, these 'self-created MDs' advertised widely in places such as public urinals and sold cures through the post. Mr Sexton, a lecturer employed by Kahn, would criticize 'in a virulent manner' the business of Perry and Co, who, with a view to stopping these attacks, gave Kahn orders for anatomical models. The profit from the sale of these models enabled Kahn to keep his museum open. Later, seeing an opportunity to turn bad publicity into good, the Jordans persuaded Kahn to go into business with

them. The collaboration proved a financially successful one. Kahn's museum, which transferred to the Salle Robin at 232 Piccadilly, offered an opportunity for lecturers to talk publicly about the all but unmentionable subject of venereal disease. Visitors might have recognized the signs of disease in themselves after seeing the ulcers and eruptions modelled in wax, or, more likely, they might have feared themselves infected. A book, *The Shoals and Quicksands of Youth*, was discretely sold to them.<sup>14</sup> Though ostensibly written by Kahn, this account of the venereal diseases was a re-working of Perry and Company's lurid self-published tract *The Silent Friend*, through which they advertised their treatments. Clients could then consult a 'doctor' on the premises, or correspond, anonymously, from home. Men reluctant to approach a regular practitioner used the museum as, in effect, a walk-in venereal disease clinic; in time it became little more than a front to sell pamphlets and medicines, principally to the worried well. Kahn became a wealthy man; he rented a large house in Harley Street, furnished it lavishly, kept a carriage and pair, and rode in the park. This nouveau riche lifestyle drew the attention of the medical press to his business: the museum, wrote his critics, was a form of self-advertisement, and the cures offered there were mere quackery. In the mid 1850s, Kahn became a target of a vitriolic anti-quackery campaign orchestrated by several medical journals, which made it their business to expose 'the gang of vile Jew Quacks'.<sup>15</sup>

Kahn and his associates were accused of peddling bogus cures and treating imaginary diseases; relying on the natural reluctance of 'sexual hypochondriacs' to complain publicly, and of threatening to expose patients as masturbators or fornicators if they went to law.<sup>16</sup> In the *Lancet*, Wakley attacked Kahn personally, claiming he had: 'no qualification to practice in England—if he possesses any at all . . .'.<sup>17</sup> In this, Wakley appears to have been correct; there is no evidence that Kahn had ever taken a degree, though while in England he styled himself an MD of Vienna. In August 1857, a county court action was brought against Kahn for extortion. The plaintiff recovered £20 that he had paid for 'improper' treatments after complaining of having 'clap' and being diagnosed with spermatorrhoea. Kahn and his confederates capitalized on the medical profession's success in pathologizing male sexuality by trading on anxieties over ill-defined conditions such as spermatorrhoea and nervous exhaustion, but they did not invent them.<sup>18</sup> Medical experts for the plaintiff accepted spermatorrhoea as a diagnosis but disagreed over its treatment. The case ruined Kahn's professional reputation by publicizing his association with 'advertising quacks'. He became 'such a negative in the medical profession', quipped *Punch*, that he was considering changing his name to 'can't'. In its report of the trial, the *Lancet* castigated Kahn's museum as an 'obscene and disgusting' display, 'totally unfit for general exhibition'.

Later in the year, when Lord Campbell's Obscene Publications Act became law, the *Lancet* suggested that the museum might be prosecuted for obscenity, as were 'filthy books'.<sup>19</sup>

Kahn did not abandon the museum's educational objectives; he continued to lecture and sold copies of his popular lectures *The Evangel of Human Nature*,<sup>20</sup> a guide to diet, hygiene and sexual health, and *Men With Tails*, a description of the Niam-Niams of central Africa.<sup>21</sup> In his last published work he returned to embryology, giving an account of a 'heteradelph', a child with a supernumerary pair of lower limbs, that was born in Lancashire in May 1857 and acquired by Kahn for his museum, where it was on view at noon, 2 pm and 4 pm.<sup>22</sup> At these times Kahn delivered a lecture in which he criticized the widely accepted theory that fetal malformations were caused by the mother's imagination. The fetus formed too early in development, argued Kahn, for the mental processes of women who knew they were pregnant to influence its development. In 1863, Kahn applied for inclusion on the newly-created medical register, but this was refused, the reason given being that

[t]he Committee are not satisfied that Dr Kahn was practising as a Physician, in the United Kingdom, before the 1st day of October, 1858'.<sup>23</sup>

Despite his lack of academic qualifications, Kahn had certainly been in practice, as the *Lancet* and others had pointed out, and in 1860 had been unsuccessfully sued for malpractice.<sup>24</sup> But the General Medical Council showed no inclination to recognize his experience, undoubtedly because of the controversy surrounding activities at his museum. In 1864, with absurd inconsistency, it was intended to prosecute Kahn under the Medical Act of 1858 for unlicensed practice but he was found to have already left the country.<sup>25</sup> His fate thereafter is obscure, though he probably returned to Germany.

Kahn's former associates continued to run the museum and their medical practice under his name—it being the Jordans' custom to use business names of well-known medical men (other pseudonyms included Cooper, Bright, and Harvey). Kahn's name took on a life of its own and in London, quacks were practising under that pseudonym until the late 1870s.<sup>26</sup> A 'Kahn's Museum', apparently also linked to the Jordans, opened in New York in 1870. Books allegedly written by Kahn were published in England until 1873 and in America as late as 1917.<sup>27</sup>

## THE MUSEUM IS BROKEN UP

To their critics, the Jordans were quacks who employed unproven remedies, often sold through the post, to treat

'secret diseases' in gullible patients. Their cures were given some scientific cachet by association with Kahn's museum and were more acceptable to spermatorrhoea sufferers than the orthodox surgical treatments, which included urethral cautery and castration.<sup>28</sup> There was no satisfactory legal means of stopping the Jordans' trade because, as unqualified practitioners, they were not subject to the Medical Act of 1858. Paradoxically, this legislation regulated only qualified practitioners and so discouraged unorthodox practitioners from registering while leaving them free to trade. The charge of falsely claiming to have a medical degree could be avoided by purchasing a foreign diploma and, even if convicted, the fine of £5 was no deterrent. The Obscene Publications Act of 1857 offered a novel legal means of closing the museum down.

The Act was drafted in such a way that an author's intentions were irrelevant and obscene material did not have to be pornographic; it was sufficient that it encouraged 'conduct inconsistent with public morals'. It could therefore be argued that information allowing unmarried persons to 'gratify their passions without the consequences which follow'—such as pregnancy and venereal disease—was obscene under the Act.<sup>29</sup> It provided a way to regulate popular anatomy selectively, as books and pictures that were illegal if offered to the public would be acceptable to a professional audience. Professionals such as doctors and clergy were considered able, by virtue of their training and middle-class origins, to appreciate material that would corrupt weaker minds. However the lower classes and women were thought to be particularly vulnerable.

The contents of Kahn's museum, were, declared the *Lancet*, 'obscene and filthy'. The Society for the Suppression of Vice, an evangelical Protestant group that prosecuted pornographers, became involved and in February 1873 some models from the museum, then operating at Tichborne Street (Figure 3), were confiscated by the police. In December, at Marlborough Street magistrates' court in London, the owners of the museum, Messrs Roumanielle, Davidson, and Dennison, pleaded guilty to offences under the Obscene Publications Act and the magistrate, Mr Knox, ordered that their stock be destroyed. The prosecuting solicitor, Mr Collette, representing the Society for the Suppression of Vice, asked for the 'privilege' of beginning the destruction himself, which was immediately granted, and, accompanied by Police Inspector Harnett and Sergeant Butcher, he proceeded to smash with a hammer the first of the anatomical waxes, the fragments of which were then handed back to the defendants. The destroyed models, noted *The Times*, 'were of the most elaborate character, and said to cost a considerable sum of money'.<sup>30</sup> The following year, the Society for the Suppression of Vice claimed that 'great good was effected' by Kahn's Museum having been



Figure 3 The entrance to Kahn's museum, close to what is now Piccadilly Circus

(literally) 'broken up'.<sup>31</sup> Provincial imitators suffered the same fate; Woodhead's Anatomical Museum in Manchester was closed by the police in 1874, despite the proprietor's protestation that: 'the Royal College of Surgeons possesses, and admits the public to, an exhibition similar to his own'. The magistrate replied that 'he could understand museums of the character of the defendant's being connected with the hospitals and medical colleges, but when they came into the hands of private individuals they were likely to produce serious evils.'<sup>32</sup>

### THE MEDICALIZATION OF ANATOMY

The campaign against Kahn reflected the newly regulated medical profession's desire to monopolize anatomy. At the beginning of the 19th century, anatomy had been seen as a subject that every educated person might profitably study. Its supposed benefits had been unchanged since the Enlightenment; the understanding of the body was a step towards understanding its creator: '[t]o know the genius and powers of an artist, it is necessary to study his

works...'.<sup>33</sup> There was a market in straightforward anatomy texts for lay people; the popular series *Pinnock's Catechisms* added, in 1825, a ninepenny volume on anatomy to those on agriculture, botany, music, and drawing.<sup>34</sup>

The increasing uniformity of medical education in the 19th century (the Apothecaries Act of 1815 first set minimum requirements in anatomy), driven by the move towards a national register of medical practitioners, increased the demand for anatomy teaching; leading to the opening of metropolitan and provincial anatomy schools. Anatomy was 'universally acknowledged' to be the 'foundation of medical science' without which medicine was 'empirical' and its practitioners no better than quacks. Anatomy could not be learned solely from books; 'only in the dissecting room' could the student acquire the necessary knowledge.<sup>35</sup> The Anatomy Act of 1832 ensured a supply of cadavers to medical schools but put an end to public dissections. Irregular practitioners and the public no longer had access to anatomy; the cry of 'no dissection, no knowledge!' could be used to dismiss the claims of self-taught practitioners.<sup>36</sup>

When the General Medical Council recommended the first national curriculum for medical training, anatomy was at the top of the list.<sup>37</sup> For sensitive students such as Henry Wentworth Acland, a future Oxford professor of medicine, the dissecting room was an unpleasant experience to be overcome.<sup>38</sup> At the time, the corrupting nature of anatomy was a common argument against allowing women to train in medicine. Anatomy became a professional rite of passage that, far from revealing the wonders of the body, was thought by some to inculcate the attitudes of detachment and indifference that made medical practice tolerable. It was largely due to anatomy that:

*'medicine acquired the reputation of being the coarsest and most degrading of academic studies. Coarse expressions and sexual innuendo were as common in the lecture hall as they were in the dissecting room. Indeed, professors used ribald mnemonic verses to tutor their charges in anatomical parts'.*<sup>39</sup>

Though disliked by many, anatomy had become the gateway to medical practice, and as such was jealously guarded. The newly regulated medical profession had a vested interest in closing public anatomy museums: anti-quackery, anti-Semitism, and hypocrisy that labelled all attempts to inform the lower classes about sexual health and human reproduction as conducive to 'vice' were all factors in their demise.

### ANATOMY FOR THE PEOPLE

The surviving accounts of visits to anatomy museums, written by relatively well-educated middle class Victorian men, portray them as a harmless day out. Most of the

visitors to Kahn's museum were working class and we can only guess at their range of experiences: exhibits that provoked laughter among men about town may have brought a blush to the cheeks of the less worldly. Some young people probably learned the facts of life there and many more would have obtained a better understanding of matters sexual. The shocking representations of venereal disease, onanism, and tight lacing in the medical room were also educational:

'the lessons they teach are accompanied with solemn warnings against abuses which distort or defile the beautiful structure of our being'

and to those who would listen, Kahn lectured on smoking, diet, and other medical concerns of the day. Models of the early development of the fetus showed that life did not begin at 'quickening', as was widely held, even by some medical men, and in his lecture on congenital malformations Kahn dismissed the popular belief that fetal malformations were caused by the strength of the mother's imagination.

The prosecution of Kahn's museum in 1873 effectively ended public anatomy museums as an arena for medical education in England. The Jordans shipped Kahn's collection to America, where it competed with increasingly sensational dime museums in the Bowery. The Liverpool Anatomy Museum, successor of the Manchester Museum, closed and the specimens were sold to Louis Tussaud's waxwork show ('true-to-life representations of prominent people'). When Spitzner's anatomical museum, founded in 1856, attempted to open in London in 1903, it was indicted for 'publishing indecent libels'.<sup>40</sup> Persecution of the anatomy museum transformed it from a source of wonder to a secret, taboo and slightly shameful world, 'a gloomy sepulchre of pathological horrors'.<sup>41</sup>

Public attitudes to educational displays of anatomical specimens were not tested again until 2002–2003 when a temporary exhibition of plastinated anatomical specimens (the first dedicated public museum of anatomy in England for some 130 years), was brought to London, again from Germany. In 11 months, according to its organizer Professor Gunther von Hagens, the exhibition attracted over 840 000 visitors. Comment from medical professional bodies was generally negative, though not necessarily representative of their members' own views. The Royal College of Pathologists called it 'macabre'.<sup>42</sup> The Anatomical Society of Great Britain described it as a 'mere spectacle' that would 'sensationalise and trivialise' its subject.<sup>43</sup> The head of the British Medical Association's ethics committee thought it 'grotesque'.<sup>44</sup> Shortly after the exhibition's departure, the British parliament introduced guidelines,<sup>45</sup> and subsequent legislation, that in effect

prevented its return; one objection being that it 'offended the sensibilities of a number of our constituents'.<sup>46</sup>

The Human Tissue Act 2004 makes it unlikely that an anatomical museum set up as a private venture would be licensed in England, even if such a museum were financially a going concern. The medical monopoly of anatomy has, however, served the subject poorly, with medical school anatomy museums closing down and anatomy teaching restricted to the necessary minimum.<sup>47</sup> Some undergraduate anatomy courses now contain less material than Pinnock's ninepenny *Catechism*. Anatomy is increasingly isolated as one of the few sciences whose professional associations still eschew attempts to engage public interest. Perhaps the time has come to acknowledge that the anatomy museum has not been well served by Victorian values.

*Competing interests* None declared.

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